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IRRESISTIBLE FORCE

A cable TV drama portrays one mother's battle with the Navy
to bring her gay son's killers to justice

by Will O'Bryan

Because he was gay, Alan Schindler, a U.S. Navy sailor, was beaten to death by two of his shipmates. Terry Helvey and Charles Vins murdered Schindler in October 1992 in a public restroom during shore leave in Sasebo, Japan. Schindler was 23.

The crime didn't end with Schindler's death, an event so brutal that every organ in his body was destroyed. The injustice lingered on with the

it's an interpretation of Hell. It's the only brief clip that attempts to bring the audience into the fearful, chaotic, insular conditions aboard the Belleau Wood. That Schindler referred to his new ship as the "Hell-eau Wood" was not mentioned.

As a matter of fact, Schindler, played with lamb-like innocence by Paul Popowich, has but a few scenes. Little enough of Schindler's life is in this film that another movie on the affair would not be overkill.

The direction the story takes in *Any Mother's Son* is understandable, considering the filmmakers' intention to relay Hajdys' perspective. Were the film destined to hit a core sexual-minority audience, a film about Schindler would certainly have had different priorities.

Nevertheless, as it stands on its own merits, it remains a gripping, moving re-enactment of a true story that's not been told often enough. The acting is low-key, save for Hedy Burress as Schindler's sister, Kathy, who takes it over the top on occasion. Sada Thompson, who may best be remembered for her role on *Family*, is the calm center of the familial storm, more likely to jump ship than referee. Her very stoic performance is refreshing amid such an emotional story. The dialogue is believable, especially the homophobic rants by Hajdys' former sister-in-law, Doris (Fiona Reed), which reveal what we suspect goes on behind some hateful doors but are never privy to.

The drama surrounding the criminal charges

against Schindler's assailants, Helvey (Scott Gibson) and Vins (Michael Gabriel), is enough to hold anyone's attention, regardless of sexual orientation. Vins was sentenced behind closed doors and served 78 days in prison for his role—repeated kicks to the head—in Schindler's death. Vins' scant punishment is what prompted Hajdys to directly involve herself in Helvey's sentencing, taking the story to a military courtroom in Japan. (Despite scene changes, the entire film



Bonnie Bedelia in *Any Mother's Son*

Navy's treatment of the two assailants and of Schindler's mother, Dorothy Hajdys.

On Aug. 11, Lifetime Television will air its made-for-cable film *Any Mother's Son*, the story of Hajdys' coming to terms with her son's sexuality and fighting for justice on his behalf.

Bonnie Bedelia as Hajdys presents a salt-of-the-earth, blue-collar woman from working-class Chicago who drops the word "queer" as often as she reaches for a cigarette—and she's a chain smoker. Hajdys seems to have cooperated frankly, helping to prevent the portrayal of her character from being sanitized or diluted.

The subtle drama in *Any Mother's Son* is Hajdys facing her own homophobia as she learns more about her son's life: through the press, through his journals and through his friends. The overt drama is her battle with the Navy.

Hajdys, the daughter, ex-wife and mother of Navy men, is painted as a woman who, through every stage of her life, has trusted the Navy with people important to her. Her seeming naiveté toward this governmental, self-preserving Leviathan with a ruthless attitude about public relations is understandable. The military feeds, clothes, doctors and disciplines those in its care. One would have to give up some measure of skepticism to be so mothered. It's a theme that resurfaces time and time again in the movie as officers play upon Hajdys' faith in the "Navy family."

This theme hangs so heavily over *Any Mother's Son* that it sometimes feels like a cliché conspiracy film. Then you remember that these are, for the most part, events as they actually happened. And the Navy—Lifetime re-enactments aside—did have reason to be on the defensive. Schindler, after being moved from the U.S.S. Midway (where he was reportedly comfortable with his sexuality) to the U.S.S. Belleau Wood, came out to the Navy in hopes of being discharged. Following his admission, the commanding staff of the Belleau Wood did nothing to ensure Schindler's safety. No effort was made to protect him from on-board harassment, let alone murder.

The way *Any Mother's Son* follows the story from Hajdys' perspective, this aspect of the Navy's compliance is somewhat downplayed in order to concentrate on its seeming reluctance to involve Hajdys in proceedings against Schindler's killers. The actual conditions that Schindler and other gay and lesbian sailors and soldiers live under is not the star of this movie. A gay sailor being hit in the face as he sleeps is presented in surreal terms: Under red light and in slow motion, faces hidden,

was shot on location in Toronto.)

Particularly touching, though, are actual lines from Schindler's journal, which the Navy mailed to Hajdys with the rest of her son's personal effects. In the film, Hajdys begins reading her son's journal before she's even left the post office parking lot.

"Miracle of miracles," she reads, "I'm in love." Continuing, she learns that the object of Schindler's affection is a man from New York. To this revelation, add Hajdys' trip to San Diego to be at a memorial service for Schindler, largely attended by gay men who knew him.

Lifetime tried to give the audience as intimate a view as possible into Hajdys' understanding of Schindler following his death. With Bedelia's help, for the most part they succeed.

Any Mother's Son shows on Lifetime Television at 9 pm Aug. 11, 9 pm Aug. 14, 8 pm Aug. 17, 8 pm Aug. 23, and noon Aug. 31.

Dorothy Hajdys is circulating a petition requesting that the Navy deny clemency and parole to Terry Helvey, who was given a life sentence. Helvey will be eligible for parole in 2002. For petition information, call the Servicemembers Legal Defense Network at (202) 328-3244, e-mail sldn@sldn.org, or visit the SLDN Web site (www.sldn.org/).